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On Victorville's future fire services, loss of local control a key deal-breaker

Shea Johnson, The Daily Press

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San Bernardino County Fire Asst. Fire Chief Dan Mejia grabs paperwork from his seat as he prepares to address the Victorville City Council on Tuesday about the department's attraction to annexation. [Shea Johnson, Daily Press]

With County Fire's 10-year contract expiring June 30, city officials are now under intense pressure to chart the course ahead for the city's fire services.

VICTORVILLE — Discussions over the future of the city's fire services Tuesday night were separated from a proposed sales tax for public safety, which at times have seemed undoubtedly intertwined, with two council members declaring polar positions and Victorville's fire chief outlining County Fire's strategy in seeking a permanent deal.

The crux of the argument to either maintain a contractual relationship with the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**, or re-launch a city-ran fire department, was carried by Mayor Pro Tem Jim Cox, deeply worried about the prospect the city would forever relinquish local control.

Councilwoman Blanca Gomez endorsed the third-option annexation into County Fire's Service Zone FP-5, an immutable agreement that does away with the contractual relationship, and pledged her unwavering support to the fire department while she crossed her fingers from the dais as a symbol of her solidarity with them.

"Ms. Gomez has already made up her mind to annex to County Fire, I've made up my mind never to annex to County Fire," Cox summed, "and so we have at least two council members who are the opposite sides of the spectrum here."

With County Fire's 10-year contract expiring June 30, city officials are now under intense pressure to chart the course ahead for the city's fire services.

Failure of the half-percent sales tax for public safety, Measure K, would eliminate the element of choice, however, while delivering immediate clarity to the situation: The city would have no option but to annex to County Fire, officials say.

But until the Nov. 7 special election for the ballot measure, it has become incumbent upon city leaders to continue to vet the three options in front of them, with Cox calling it an "error" to not more fully scrub the possibility of reverting back to a city department, which was disbanded in 2008 in favor of contracting with County Fire.

After the estimated \$1.3 million conversion to a city department, with another \$2.2 million in apparatus replacements, Victorville would realize a roughly \$2 million annual savings over its County Fire contract beginning in year two, according to a consultant's study referenced by City Manager Doug Robertson on Tuesday.

But the city also would not be able to expand its fire services, including adding to its current number of firefighters, without a boost to its general fund. Officials have said the \$8.5 million projected to be raised by Measure K, specifically earmarked only for public safety, would enable the addition of 15 firefighter/paramedics and the opening of Fire Station 315.

Questions were also raised over whether the city could recruit the roughly 60 personnel needed to staff its fire department after engaging in an "extensive hiring process," where current County Fire employees, deemed as obviously attractive applicants, would be given considerable attention to make the switch.

"It would be difficult, I will say, to hire enough employees between now and July 1," Robertson tempered. "It would be difficult but not impossible."

Yet the notion was challenged by County Fire Capt. Travis Aguirre, a division vice president for the department's union, who had once been a city firefighter and noted the obstacles he witnessed in the smaller department.

"I would say that I could pretty much guarantee," Aguirre said, speaking of personal opinion, "that none of the previous employees or the employees that are currently serving would want to come back."

The suggestion drew a rebuke from Cox, who said he was "really disappointed" that Aguirre would seek to cast the feelings of others through such a broad lens.

Cox has been the fiercest public critic on the Council of annexation, steadfast that a contractual relationship with County Fire would accomplish the same goals and that the Council, as its governing authority, had the best interest of Victorville in mind. It's a stance likely hardened by the County Fire union's backing of the anti-Measure K campaign, which has left him flabbergasted.

But on Tuesday, the public also heard Dan Mejia, an assistant fire chief for County Fire who heads the Victorville division, describe in detail the department's thinking for pursuing annexation in not just Victorville, but also in the cities of Hesperia and Adelanto. Such a deal would be accompanied by a \$153 yearly parcel tax.

According to Mejia, who said he had not planned to speak publicly from the dais, the allure of annexation boils down to the ability to long-term plan and to rely on resources elsewhere under the County Fire umbrella to drive costs down, such as cohabiting fire stations.

A city-run department inherently breeds a sort of tunnel-vision mindset, he suggested, where officials are hyper-focused on the happenings inside their city's borders and the service they can provide.

"We try to convince everybody it's the level of service all of us collectively can provide," he said, "to the citizens up here in the High Desert."

He cited a 6 percent cost increase for County Fire services since it assumed duty in Victorville despite a doubled workload as a signal that fire officials have been keen to identify cost-saving measures from the get-go.

He also acknowledged the department's concern for its employees. But he insisted that the delivery model County Fire seeks is reflective of its commitment to better all-around services and that Cox's local control concerns, while respected, were ultimately unfounded.

"It's not about building this big machine, it's not about that," Mejia said. "I would hope that in the nine years that we have provided service to the city of Victorville, that we've never given you any reason to believe you don't have local control, that you can't come to us and we're not responsive to your needs."

The Council voted 4-1, with Gomez dissenting, to further explore options for services including a city-ran fire department. Gomez had also floated the idea, seemingly sarcastically, of seeking enacting city police services too, but that did not gain traction.

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20171018/on-victorvilles-future-fire-services-loss-of-local-control-key-deal-breaker>

Pursuit ends in officer-involved shooting in Pinon Hills; suspect in critical condition

Victor Valley News Group

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The suspect was airlifted to a trauma center in critical condition after he was shot three times by a sheriff's deputy.

PINON HILLS, Calif. (VVNG.com)- A 43-year-old suspect was shot multiple times following a pursuit that ended in an officer-involved shooting Wednesday.

Just after 2:00 p.m., a San Bernardino County Sheriff's Deputy was involved in a pursuit for several miles with a white Ford work van. The pursuit terminated with gunfire in a desert field near Daisy Lane and Oasis Road in Pinon Hills.

Details on what happened after the pursuit terminated are not clear at this time. However, the suspect was struck by deputy gunfire several times.

"The suspect was shot three times and was airlifted in critical condition to a trauma center," stated sheriff's spokeswoman Cindy Bachman.

Bachman confirmed the deputy was not injured in the shooting.

Information will be updated as it becomes available.

<http://www.vvng.com/pursuit-ends-officer-involved-shooting-pinon-hills-suspect-critical-condition/>

Rollover Crash on 7th Street Causes Temporary Closure

Victor Valley News Group

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Photo: Royanna Moreno

VICTORVILLE, CALIF. (VVNG.com) A woman sustained minor injuries after she was involved in a collision on 7th Street Wednesday afternoon.

At around 2:00 p.m., **San Bernardino County Fire Department** firefighters and Victorville Sheriff's Deputies, along with AMR, responded to a single-vehicle rollover crash involving a black Nissan sedan on 7th Street and Forrest Avenue.

The driver was alert and conscious as she was transported by ambulance to a local hospital for complaints of minor injuries.

The surrounding streets were closed for short-time until the tow truck arrived. Officials are looking into reports from witnesses that the driver may have been street racing another vehicle just before the crash.

The exact cause of the collision remains under investigation.

<http://www.vvng.com/rollover-crash-7th-street-causes-temporary-closure/>
